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# Four Ways to Handle Multicultural Differences in a Team



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**Working across cultures can sometimes be frustrating, but the results are well worth the learning journey.**

Companies operating in many countries benefit from having a multicultural top management team. However, working in such a team is challenging. People from different cultures behave in ways we often find perplexing, and suspending our judgement on these differences is difficult.

Even something as simple as what is “efficient” is disputed in cross-cultural settings. For example, the Japanese spend a lot of time upfront in meetings getting to know one another before making decisions. In contrast, an American may see this as a waste of time and dive immediately into the task at hand. I have found the Dutch to be argumentative throughout meetings, but they are excellent at concluding with a resolution that is accepted by everyone.

When I was teaching participants drawn from a wide range of nationalities, one of my favourite exercises was a straightforward one. I would ask participants to imagine they were in a boat with their mother, their spouse

and their child. Suddenly the boat starts sinking. None of the three can swim and only one can be rescued. Who would they save?

### **Multiple correct views of reality**

This clear-cut thought experiment revealed how people think and diverge in their fundamental assumptions across different cultures.

- Participants from the Middle East or China usually chose their mother. Their argument? “My mother gave me life and that is irreplaceable. By comparison, I can always have another spouse or child.”
- Participants from the United States usually chose their spouse. Their reasoning: “My spouse is my partner for life. In contrast, my mother has already had a full life, and I can always have more children.”
- Participants from India and some European countries usually chose their child, the logic being that the child represents the future and has most of his or her life ahead of them. They often reassured me that, in any case, their mother and spouse would also wish them to save the child.

The point here is to demonstrate that there is no correct answer to the question. We must accept that there are multiple views of reality, and that they are culturally influenced. Of course, these are cultural averages, but everyone within a culture is not homogeneous.

When we talk about cultural differences, while there is variance across countries, this does not deny that there are differences within cultures. As an analogy, when we say Americans are taller than Indians, it does not mean that every American is taller than every Indian. Rather, on average Americans and Indians differ in height.

### **A compass to navigate cross-cultural waters**

In the face of cultural differences, working in multinational teams requires a solid dose of flexibility. I have found the following considerations helpful:

1. See differences as a source of curiosity rather than contempt. Try to understand why others see things so differently. What in their history or environment could explain their stance? With such an attitude, you can embark on a fascinating journey of boundless discovery and mutual understanding.

2. Companies that have a long history of employing people from diverse cultures tend to develop organisational norms that supersede idiosyncratic cultural differences. These organisational norms – for instance, one conversation at a time – are expected to be followed, and are either culturally neutral or negotiated. I recall once being in a meeting involving Italian and Dutch people. After a frustrating day, it was agreed that during the next meeting the Italians would not use their mobiles, while the Dutch promised to let the Italians make the food arrangements. If you are at a lunchtime business meeting with the Dutch, expect a sandwich and a glass of milk. By comparison, in the Flemish part of Belgium (as close to Dutch as you can get), the lunch can stretch to two hours. Yes, perplexing is the word.

3. When working across cultures, expect your assumptions to be challenged. I remember teaching sales-force management to some Swedes. I was taken aback when they argued that giving them sales incentives implied that they would not put in their best efforts otherwise. They thought an incentive plan meant the company did not trust them! How you motivate people differs substantially across cultures.

4. Lastly, when working in cross-cultural teams, accept some inefficiency as functional. A team can't progress as a unit without spending time understanding one another and their differences. In terms of **Tuckman's model**, the 'norming' part after the 'forming' and 'storming' will take longer than in mono-cultural teams. But, once this is done, there will be a higher level of 'performing'. The team will be more creative as it looks at the problem and the solution from multiple lenses.

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